DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 620 UD 023 351

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TITLE Winter 1981 Study of Black Undergraduate Students Attending Predominantly White, State-Supported Universities. Preliminary Report.
INSTITUTION Michigan Univ., Ann Arbor. Center for Afroamerican and African Studies.
SPONS AGENCY Ford Foundation, New York, N.Y.; Rockefeller Foundation, New York, N.Y.; Spencer Foundation, Chicago, Ill.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 13p.; Part of the National Study of Black College Students.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; College Faculty; College Students; Higher Education; Peer Relationship; Racial Discrimination; *Racial Relations; Self Concept; *State Universities; *Student Adjustment; *Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics; *Student College Relationship; Student Experience; Student Teacher Relationship; Whites

ABSTRACT

Black undergraduate students' educational characteristics, experiences, and outcomes at six predominantly white, State-supported universities were examined in this study. Data were collected from 695 undergraduates by means of questionnaires. Findings show that black students in the study came from high schools where blacks were in the majority, and entered college with established histories of academic achievement. The majority were doing relatively well academically, although their grades were lower than in high school. Frequent exposure to racial discrimination was reported. Many students characterized general relationships between black students and white faculty and staff as negative. However, personal relationships with white faculty, staff, and students were rated good to excellent. Black students also reported that white faculty had difficulty relating to them and tended to avoid interaction with them outside of class. Most students believed white faculty to be concerned about their success but felt that they sometimes evaluated black academic performance unfairly. Socially, black students were at a severe disadvantage. Even though black organizations sponsored activities, over half the students reported infrequent participation in such activities. Most students were reasonably satisfied with the amount of financial aid they received. Finally, despite obvious problems, black students clearly possessed high perceptions of self. (CMG)

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ED241620

JAN 30 1984

Preliminary Report: Winter 1981 Study of Black Undergraduate Students Attending Predominately White, State-Supported Universities

Fall 1982

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This study of Black students was funded by grants from the Ford, Spencer, and Rockefeller Foundations. This is the first in a series of reports. Please address all inquiries to: The National Study of Black College tudents, 909 Monroe; Room 207/407, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48109.

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Introduction

A variety of circumstances have converged to make research into the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students who attend White universities a major concern. Previous educational research on Black Americans has focussed largely on the elementary and high school years. Only a limited portion of the literature has looked at the college experiences of Black youth. Notable among these works are Morris' Elusive Equality (1979), Thomas' Black Students in Higher Education: Conditions and Experiences in the 1970's (1981), Blackwell's Mainstreaming Outsiders (1981), and Astins' Minorities in Higher Education (1982). Attention to Black students' college experiences is vital because over the past 25 years sweeping changes have occurred in patterns of college attendance for Blacks. Whereas, the majority were previously enrolled in historically Black colleges and universities, by 1973 this percentage had dropped to one-fourth and has maintained that level through 1982. Thus, three-quarters of all Black college students currently attend predominantly White colleges and universities. Similarly, 57 percent of all Bachelors' Degrees conferred on Black students during 1978-79 were granted by predominantly White colleges and universities.

The relatively rapid redistribution of Black students from Black to White colleges and universities suggests that the 1954 Supreme Court decision in favor of school desegregation is attainable and that educational equity for Blacks is just around the corner. However, closer examination of patterns shows that Black students on White campuses continue to be severely disadvantaged compared to White students. Their persistance rates, academic achievement levels, enrollment in advanced study, overall psycho-social adjustments and eventual career attainments are all lower (Allen, 1982).

Extensive research is necessary in order to ascertain the actual educational characteristics, experiences and outcomes of Black youth in White colleges and universities. Such research will help to identify

factors which facilitate (or block) their successful completion of school. We also expect findings from this research to aid programmatic attempts to improve these experiences.

A Study of Black Characteristics, Experiences and Outcomes

This study examined Black undergraduate student educational characteristics experiences and outcomes at six predominantly White campuses nationally (University of Michigan-Ann Arbor; University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; Universtiy of California-Los Angeles; Arizona State University; Memphis State University and State University of New York-Stony Brook). These campuses were selected for study because they capture important regional, and proportional enrollment variations. Since the overwhelming majority of Blacks in higher education attend public institutions only state-supported universities were studied. The data were from Winter, 1981 mailed questionnaires to which 695 undergraduates responded (30 percent response rate). The administrative structure of the study centralized data collection and handling at the University of Michigan, while research collaborators on each campus handled on site responsibilities (e.g., publicity, administrative details, etc.). The random sample for study was selected from computerized lists of currently enrolled students supplied by Registrars' offices at participating universities. The sampling procedure stratified students by year of enrollment and employed random interval selection within levels to choose respondents.

This study used a complex model to investigate relationships between Black student educational experiences and outcomes on White campuses. Thus, the major purpose of the study was to assess what happens to Black students between college entry and graduation (or dropping out). An attempt was made to systematically trace connections between student family background, high school education, campus interpersonal relations (e.g. with peers, staff and faculty), college commitment to Black students, student feelings of anxiety/alienation and observed student outcomes.

This summary is kept intentionally brief and straightforward. Later reports from the data will offer more detailed, in-depth coverage and provide more involved analysis/reporting of data. Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency distributions, means) are used in this report to summarize major or important patterns from these data.

Findings

We will now consider findings from this study. The first measures of interest here are student college satisfaction, university GPA (academic performance level) and educational/occupational aspirations. Overall, the students' adjustment to the university appears to be awkward and generally unsatisfying. Nearly 62 percent of the students reported little or no integration into general student activities on campus. In addition, 45 percent reported that extracurricular activities on the campus did not adequately reflect their interests.

The majority of students were doing relatively well academically; 10 percent reported GPAs of C (2.0) or less and approximately 45 percent reported GPAs of C+ (2.76) or higher. However, fewer than 3 percent reported GPAs above B+ (3.5); a significant shift from the 37 percent with B+ averages in high school. One third of students set their ultimate educational goal at the Bachelor's degree level. Another third aspired to Master's level degees; the last third sought terminal, professional (M.D., J.D., or D.D.S.) or doctoral degrees. While educational goals expressed by students were evenly distributed, occupational aspirations were almost uniformly high. Nearly 85 percent of the students expected to move into upper level white collar positions.

The backgrounds of Black students in this national study suggest that popularized stereotypes bear little resemblance to the actual characteristics of Black college students across the country. Sixty-five percent of students in our sample grew up in two parent households.

Only fifteen percent are from families whose incomes are $8,000 or less. Nearly half are from families whose incomes exceed $21,000 per year. The pursuit of education appears to be encouraged and practiced in these students' families, as evidenced by parents' educational attainments and the even higher attainment of their siblings. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents' fathers, 29 percent of their mothers and 39 percent of their siblings are reported as having attended college.

High School Education Experiences

Blacks students in this study entered college with established records of high academic achievement. Over half (67 per cent) reported high school grade point averages of B or better. Of all students, 37 percent reported grade point averages of B+ (3.5) or better. Over half the students ranked in the top ten percent of their graduating class, with over one-fourth ranking in the top five percent.

The high school years did not, however, prepare these students for the reality of being a racial minority in school settings. Fewer than 17 percent attended high schools where Black enrollment was 10 percent or less. On the contrary, over half of these students attended Black majority high schools (60 per cent + Black) prior to entering their respective universities. Apart from Memphis State University, Black students in this sample represented less than 10 percent of the total student enrollment in their respective campuses.

Campus Interpersonal Relations

On entering college, these students were forced to cope with the unfamiliar situation of being in a minority, and not majority as was the case in high school. We see considerable evidence of social adjustment difficulites which undoubtedly have negative consequences for Black student outcomes. Half of the students point to lack of money and inadequate high school preparation as the most serious barriers to more Black students being admitted and deciding to attend the University. Representative comments were:

> "Black students here and at all colleges will be seriously affected by budget cuts that will decrease financial aid." "Purely mechanical GPA/SAT cutoff rule. No interviews or subjective criteria are looked at. Most Black students don't have $200 for a SAT prep course, so they don't get in."

Seventy-nine percent of the students believed there were inadequate numbers of Black students at their universities. As for seeking Black faculty and/or staff to aid in easing adjustment problems, these students encounter additional problems. Black student contact with Black faculty and staff is at best limited. Sixty-seven percent of the students reported that they had little or no exposure to Black faculty and staff. Most students expressed the need for an increased number of Black faculty and staff as evidenced by these comments:

> "There are not enough Black faculty and staff, especially outside of the strictly minority departments." "I have had only one Black professor. I think that there should be more. I see more Black cleaning people than Black professors and staff members. "I have never met a Black faculty member and so far I have only seen a couple of them on campus. I had never even thought of this seriously before and now that I am, I feel angry."

Of necessity, Black students must rely on white students and professors for help in making their adjustment to campus life. In this connection a majority (80 percent) of the Black students reported that White peers only sometimes showed high regard for their academic abilities. However, over half (87 percent) also reported that White students sometimes or often avoided interacting with them socially outside the academic halls. Just under two-thirds (59 percent) reported that White students treat them as equals. Academic competition among students at participating universities was reportedly intense. Nevertheless, a majority reported that this competition either did not affect them or was positive in its

effect.

In the area of race relations, Black students did not fare too well. Fifty-eight percent of the students reported having experienced at least one incident of racial discrimination. Of this group, 60% cited racial insults and negative racial attitudes as the most common forms of discrimination encountered. Three examples of reported incidents of race discrimination follow:

> "An academic counselor told me I shouldn't take a certain class because it was extremely difficult and Blacks can't handle difficult classes."
>
> "I was walking out of my professor's office and another professor in the office said that Black people really do look like monkeys, no wonder no one can really like them."
>
> "There was a dummy in the form of a Black man dressed in a white sheet with a string around its neck suspended from a lamp post in front of my dorm."

More than 60% of the Black students characterized general Black student relations with white faculty (60%), white staff (63%) on their campus as negative. However, at least eighty percent reported good to excellent personal relationships with White faculty (83%), white staff (88%), and White students (80%). Thus, the view was one of generally poor race relations on the campus although these students claimed to maintain positive relationships as individuals with Whites on the campus in question.

Interesting patterns were apparent in Black students' evaluations of their largely White faculties. Over half (80%) reported professors as evidencing some difficulty in relating to them. Over half (80%) of the students also reported that professors commonly avoided interacting with them outside class. While a significant portion of the students reported professors as encouraging them to pursue advanced studies (43%) and demonstrating concern about their success (51%), over half expressed doubts concerning

professorial fairness in evaluating Black student academic performance.

There appear to be three major classes of problems and difficulties most commonly faced by Black students at these White universities. Twenty-one percent report academic problems, 28% refer to problems of cultural adjustment or feelings of social isolation and 18 percent report problems with racism. As one student so aptly stated, Blacks have to cope with a plethora of problems:

> "Discrimination by White students. The lack of sufficient finances; isolation because of the small amount of Black students. The hard grading and work that is distributed - many Blacks come from lower skilled schools and are not prepared for the big advance in academic skills."

Campus Supportive Services

Black students' evaluations of university supportive services are largely positive. With respect to finances, most identified parental earnings and grants-in-aid as major sources of funding for college. Twenty-one percent of the students reported not having received any financial aid from their universities. Roughly a third of the students judged their financial aid as adequate. A higher proportion (45%) appeared satisfied with the calibre of academic advising received, although a sizeable third expressed dissatisfaction. Three-quarters of the students found campus remedial, tutorial, and academic services somewhat helpful. Similarly, half the students identified some campus office, program, or organization as having been particularly helpful to their academic and/or social adjustment.

Even though evaluations of supportive services are largely positive, seventy-five percent of the students know of other Black students who left the university for reasons other than graduation. Among the reasons cited, the majority (70%) reported either lack of money or academic problems as the reasons why students left. Commonly cited reasons were:

"Personal family problems, lack of motivation, lack of money to continue , didn't have the GPA to continue."; "Unhappy with the atmosphere here; the pressures; the impersonal system."

Student-Attitudes

Black students in this study exhibited high self-concepts. On most points of evaluation, mean scores were above average. The points evaluated were leadership ability, self-confidence, popularity, physical well being, community perception of student, closeness with family, high school teachers' evaluations, popularity with opposite sex, and professors' evaluations. On all points, well over 50% of the student sample rated themselves as above average or high.

Summary and Conclusion

Black students in this study enter college with established histories of academic achievement, measured by high school GPA and rank in graduating class. These Black students come from high schools where Blacks were in the majority. They enter universities where Blacks are a decided minority. At these universities, they receive at best limited exposure to Black faculty and staff primarily because there are so few Blacks employed in such positions.

Students in this study report relatively good relations with their white peers in the classroom. Outside the academic halls, however, they have little or no interaction with the same White students. There is intense academic competition among students at these universities. For the most part, Black students report either being unaffected by this competition or are positively motivated as a result.

Students in this study report frequent exposure to racial discrimination. In general, students reported fairly poor relationships with white faculty, staff, and students on their campus. These relationships were rated good to excellent when the students evaluated them in terms of their personal interactions with White faculty, staff,

and students.

The relationship between White professors and Black students is variable. Students report White faculty as having difficulty relating to them and tending to avoid interacting with Black students outside of class. Most students believe White faculty members to be concerned about their success, but feel that they sometimes evaluate Black student academic performance unfairly.

Socially, Black students are at a severe disadvantage. Even though Black organizations sponsor activities, over half the students report, at best, infrequent participation in such activities. The students call overwhelmingly for the recruitment and admission of more Black students.

Most students were reasonably satisfied with the amount of financial aid received. However, over a third felt the quality of other supportive services (e.g., academic advising) was less than satisfactory. Finances for their college educations were mostly provided by parents or from the student's own income. Despite obvious problems, Black students in the sample clearly possess high perceptions of "self."

Higher education is oriented around two fundamental assumptions. First, it is assumed students will enter college with adequate preparation and sufficient self-motivation to insure their ability to take maximum advantage of the opportunities for learning and advancement afforded. Second, it is assumed universities will provide optimal settings (in academic and social-psychological terms) where talented minds will find ample opportunity to develop to their fullest potential. Therefore, under normal circumstances, one expects to find symbiotic relationships between students and their universities. The relationship should be one where each feeds the needs of the other-to the mutual benefit of both. It is evident from these, and other data, that Black students in this sample are not achieving such satisfactory relationships with their universities. This disjuncture occurs sufficiently often to cause great concern.

In looking for plausible explanations of this seeming disjuncture between Black students and their universities, we are forced to admit that the implied partnership, while real, is an unequal one. That is, while Black students bear some responsibility for how they fare at these universities, theirs is not the pivotal role. The educational missions of these public universities charge them with responsibility for developing and implementing strategies which provide for the effective education of the nation's (and their respective state's) diverse population. Since these universities are the vehicles through which students matriculate, ultimate responsibility and resources for making this transition by Black students (and all students, for that matter) a smooth one rests with the institution, its officers, faculty, and staff.

The task confronting interested researchers, practitioners, and policy makers at this point is to identify factors and formulate strategies helpful in improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students in higher education. In seeking answers to the complex questions, it is useful to turn to the students themselves. When asked to suggest new programs or policies which would deal with the problems Black students experience at White universities, a response typical of the many recommendations called for:

> "A policy to eliminate the ongoing conspiracy to undermine and eventually destroy Black/Minority support services; increase, not reduce, financial aid; implement an effective system of dealing with racist instructors; sponsor and encourage more Black relevant social functions; increase effectiveness and support of Black/Minority support organizations, consortium programs."

Clearly, a tremendous gap exists between Black student needs on white campuses, as revealed in this research, and the currently existing policies and programs, at the respective universities. Without continuous effort, long term investment of resources and sincere commitment, predominantly White universities will not reverse the patterns of declining enrollments/rising attrition rates which result in reduced numbers of Black students attending and graduating from the nation's colleges.

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